



Polish Jewry in the Research and Activities of Salo W. Baron and His Protégé Abraham Gordon Duker

MICHAŁ GALAS

Many scholars of the history of Jews in Poland wonder why Salo W. Baron devoted so little space to the community from which he descended, and they have generated various theories to explain that. A special chapter is the period up to the year 1650, which Baron discussed in volume 16 of *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, and his analysis was examined by my colleague Adam Kaźmierczyk at the conference “From Galicia to New York: Salo W. Baron and His Legacy.” The later history of Polish Jewry was not elaborated by Baron, and Polish Jews in general are rarely mentioned in his studies. It is hard to imagine that he was not thinking about his ancestors in Poland, and the fate of Polish Jews after the Holocaust. Indeed, it seems impossible. In his diary, which was partially published under the title *Under Two Civilizations: Tarnów, 1895-1914*, Baron writes about his concern for his relatives, making it clear that the destruction of Polish Jewry and the loss of his own family remained paramount for him.¹

In this essay, I do not try to answer the question why so few Polish Jews occupy space in Baron’s works, but rather point out other areas of his research activities in which Polish Jews do play an important role. Baron’s continued interest in Polish Jewry was carried out indirectly through his long-term relationship and collaboration with Abraham G. Duker, one of his first

graduate students at Columbia University. Duker wrote a ground-breaking work about Polish Jewry and about Polish-Jewish relations, but this work was carried with Baron's intimate involvement and support.

I encountered the scholarship of Salo W. Baron first when I did research on the historiography of Frankism. My second encounter with Baron came about through my research on Abraham Gordon Duker, one of Baron's first graduate students at Columbia University. I carried out this research at Tel Aviv University, where Duker's papers are currently housed, and at Stanford University, where the Baron archives are located. In the second half of the twentieth century Abraham Duker was an important contributor to Jewish historiography, but, unfortunately, today he is a forgotten figure. This essay provides the basic facts of Duker's biography, and argues that his scholarship deserves to be better known and appreciated and that, through Duker's scholarship, we can have a better grasp of Baron's continued interest in and contribution to Polish-Jewish history.

Abraham Gordon Duker was born in 1907 in Rypin (150 km north of Warsaw). There he attended Tarbut Hebrew Elementary School as well as the Polish Humanistic Middle School (he completed only six classes).² In 1923, he emigrated to the United States where he continued his education at East Side Evening High School (1927) and then at the College of the City of New York (1930). In the years 1930-33, he was enrolled as a graduate student in the History Department at Columbia University, specializing in modern Jewish and Polish history. At Columbia, Duker was one of Baron's first doctoral students, who began to teach at Columbia in 1930. Initially, Duker wanted to devote his dissertation to the history of the Jewish labor movement in Europe (or, alternatively, to the revolutions of 1848), but Baron directed him to a more specifically Polish topic. The title of Duker's doctoral dissertation was "The Polish 'Great Emigration' and the Jews: Studies in Political and Intellectual History."³ This topic became the dominant motif of Duker's academic research, as well as of his personal life because he labored on his doctoral dissertation for a very long time. Duker finally submitted the dissertation in 1956; the delay was due to the disruption of World War II as well as to other personal commitments and obligations.

In the introduction to his dissertation, Duker thanked Baron:

To Professor Salo W. Baron, my esteemed teacher and sponsor, I owe much not only for help in the choice of the subject, the facilitation of an extensive research trip and a year of research, his skillful guidance

and persistent urging, but also for the knowledge and insight in Jewish history and historical interpretation that I have gained from studying under him and associating with him.⁴

Duker's dissertation covered much more than the history of "the Great Emigration," the movement of thousands of emigrants from Poland, particularly political and cultural elites in years 1831 to 1870. In eighteen chapters and 729 pages, he presented extended studies of Polish-Jewish relations during the nineteenth century, concentrating on key figures of Polish emigration such as Maurycy Mochnacki, Andrzej Towiański, and Adam Mickiewicz.⁵

To appreciate the originality of Duker's dissertation, I should stress that Duker was one of the first scholars who highlighted these reciprocal relations as well as the Jewish impact on Polish culture in general. During the many years he had spent on this research, Duker collected a great deal of source materials that he intended to use in the dissertation. But, again after Baron's intervention, Duker cut his dissertation to eighteen chapters, instead of the initial seventy he had planned to write:

When I began the research on this dissertation in 1933 I had no suspicion that I had embarked on some twenty two years of study and writing and that it was my destiny to be the first and the last person to peruse several important archival collections in Poland for materials of pertinence to Jewish and Polish history before their destruction by the misfortunes of [life] and Nazi barbarity. The awareness of the destruction stimulated my determination to complete the history of the Great Emigration and the Jewish Problem. This was a formidable task. Moreover, the written product turned out to be too lengthy for a doctoral dissertation. Accordingly, following the advice of my sponsor Professor Salo W. Baron and Professor Otokar Odioziłik, I am hereby submitting 18 out of some 70 chapters.⁶

Duker did not want to discard all the primary sources he had collected for his dissertation, which he has subjected to close analysis. Given the amount of the material and the complexity of the problems, he planned to publish his findings in several books. Indeed, he planned to publish several other books: one book was to be based on the dissertation; another was to be called "Adam Mickiewicz's Jewish Mystique"; a third book was to be titled "Joachim Lelewel and the Jews," a topic that was barely covered in the dissertation. Other planned books included "The Polish 'Great

Emigration,” “The Jews in Relation to the Polish Insurrection of 1963,” “Andrzej Towiański,” and “Frankism.” Unfortunately, these remained but titles of books; none of these planned books ever appeared in print, even though Duker kept announcing their future publications again and again. All he managed to publish was a number of articles in various academic journals and jubilee books.

In my view, the fact that Duker’s research on Polish Jewry is not known to specialists, much less to the general public, is a great loss since his studies on Polish–Jewish relations represented an innovative approach to that field of research. For historians of Polish Jewry, even more important is the fact that, during his trips to Poland in 1933 and 1934, he had the opportunity to do research in archives that were destroyed during WWII. “The dissertation, a selection from a larger work, [is] based on archival sources mostly destroyed in World War II.”⁷ Particularly important for his studies was the Rapperswil Archives Collection in Warsaw. Because of the loss of the Polish archives, Duker’s studies are sometimes the only evidence of certain documents.⁸

Throughout the two decades that Duker labored on his dissertation, Baron was very involved in the research, and their relationship was very close. Baron also supported Duker’s academic career, while he was working on the dissertation. Duker’s name can be seen in many institutions in which Baron was also involved. For example, from the beginning, Duker was associated with the Conference of Jewish Relations.⁹ For this institution, he wrote his first study, *The Situation of the Jews in Poland*,¹⁰ which was based on observations from his research trips to Poland (Warszawa and Kraków) in 1933 and 1934. With Salo Baron in 1939, Duker joined the editorial board of the journal of *Jewish Social Studies* and served as the journal’s managing editor from 1952 to 1957. As a result of the close cooperation between Baron and Duker, and Duker’s editorial work, the anthology *A Jewish Social Studies Reader* was published in 1974, consisting of essays from *Jewish Social Studies*.¹¹ The editorial work at *Jewish Social Studies* opened for Duker another field of scholarly interest: social, cultural, and community studies of American Jewry, which is no less a neglected aspect of Duker’s scholarship than his contribution to Polish–Jewish studies.¹²

After receiving his PhD, Duker served as the president of the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago (now Spertus College of Judaica) from 1956 to 1962; from 1962 to 1972, he was a professor of Jewish history and social institutions, as well as the director of the library at Yeshiva University.

From 1972 until his retirement in 1977, he was a professor of Judaic studies at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. Duker moved to Israel in 1980 and died there in 1987.

During all these years, Duker always had in his mind history of Polish Jewry and Polish-Jewish relations. Studying his archives we can find a proof of his engagement in commemorating victims of the Holocaust but also in commemorating the heritage and culture of Polish Jewry. In contemporary historiography, one can find that interest in Polish-Jewish studies started in 1980s, particularly after the Oxford conference in 1984.¹³ We should note that only after the Holocaust did Duker, Baron, and other scholars of Polish-Jewish origin begin to appeal for the creation of a special center for the study of the history of Polish Jews at one of the universities in New York City. Duker wrote letters to authorities at Brooklyn College and Yeshiva University justifying the need for such a research center. As he saw it, religious scholars and institutions would be more appropriate for such an enterprise. Until the very end of his life, Duker carefully documented all the initiatives to develop Polish-Jewish studies in the United States, Israel, and Poland. In 1985, he wrote to Norman Lamm, then president of Yeshiva University, about the growing interest in Polish-Jewish Studies in Poland, the United Kingdom, and Israel, and he proposed that Yeshiva University should participate in a study of Polish Jews in areas related to religious heritage.¹⁴

One such scholarly initiative was a history of the Jews in Poland in the interwar period. On this project too Baron collaborated with Duker. According to Isaac Lewin,

When the Second World War ended in 1945, a group of Polish Jews living in America undertook to prepare a history of Polish Jewry during the period 1918-1939. The distinguished president of the Club of Polish Jews in America, the late Judge Maximilian Friede, took the initiative of forming a committee which would assemble the scholars able to do the work. ... The committee was created under the chairmanship of the great historian Professor Salo Baron to prepare the ground for that work.¹⁵

From Duker's archival material we learn that editorial work on that book started at the beginning of 1960, when Duker and Lewin were appointed editors and Baron the chairman of this project.

Abraham Duker and Isaac Lewin were appointed as editors. (Philip Friedman from Columbia University—and another student of Baron—prepared the detailed plan of the book under title “History of Polish Jewry during the Period of Poland’s Independence, 1918-1939”.) During the first stage of the project, Duker played an important role in communicating with chosen authors. The project was very ambitious; it included a very long list of authors from the United States and Israel, including all the leading scholars of that time. Baron was also scheduled to write an epilogue or preface, depending on the version. Over time when the enthusiasm of the project’s participants waned, there was a period of stagnation. From the initial plan only several studies were published, two of them in the volume *A History of Polish Jewry during the Revival of Poland*, including essays by Isaac Lewin, “Political History of Polish Jewry, 1918-1939,” and by Nahum Michael Gelber, “The National Autonomy of Eastern-Galician Jewry in the West-Ukrainian Republic, 1918-1919.”¹⁶ But more articles in different stages and versions can be found in the Abraham Duker Archives in Tel Aviv University.

And the last example of Salo Baron’s support for Abraham Duker is also connected to publication. When Duker did not see a chance for publication of his monographs, he decided to publish a selection of his articles that had already appeared in print. He divided his works chronologically with the exception of *The Situation of the Jews in Poland* published in 1936, which he placed at the beginning of the collected edition.¹⁷

Duker asked his mentor Baron to write the foreword to this collected volume. The manuscript was ready to go to press with the Ktav Publishing House, but, for a reason that I cannot determine, the book was not published. In Duker’s archives I found a draft of the book with an unpublished essay that Baron had written for this volume. Written in 1977, Baron’s foreword underlined why he had suggested to Duker “Great Emigration” as a topic for his dissertation. He starts with this statement:

The Polish people’s “Great Emigration” between the two anti-Russian Insurrections of 1830-31 and 1863 belongs to the highly important migratory movements in modern European history. Like the wanderings of the English Dissenters, the French Huguenots after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, as well as those of Jews and Marranos from Spain and Portugal after 1492 and 1497, its significance far transcended the number of migrants and the size of the novel groups it established in their new countries of settlement.¹⁸

Later in the essay Baron gives a short characterization of the social structure of the “Great Emigration” and outlines the major topics covered by Duker’s collected articles. He also praises Duker’s studies for giving a chance to understand “this fatal weakness and the resulting failures of the Polish quest for national independence before WWI.” Baron calls Duker “a leading American student of Polish-Jewish relations.”

Baron wrote his foreword in Phoenix, Arizona, on February 20, 1977, while visiting his daughter Shoshana Baron Tancer. When I found out that Tel Aviv University holds the papers of Abraham Duker, I was determined to carry out the will of both Duker and his teacher Baron, by publishing an expanded biography of Duker with the foreword of his mentor, along with several essays by Duker. I believe that such a volume will be of great help to scholars of Polish-Jewish history, as well as for people interested in the legacy of Salo W. Baron. By working on Abraham Duker’s scholarship on Polish-Jewish history, I have also come to encounter the legacy of his mentor, Salo Baron. I very much hope that a new generation of scholars will continue to avail themselves of the work of Salo Baron and his first student Abraham Duker, and develop their ideas into new lines of research that will benefit the field of Polish-Jewish studies.

Notes

- ¹ Salo W. Baron, *Under Two Civilizations: Tarnow, 1895-1914; Selected from the Memoir of Salo Wittmayer Baron* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). This work is unpaginated.
- ² For information on this educational system, see the entry “Tarbut,” in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, available at <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org>.
- ³ Abraham Duker, “The Polish ‘Great Emigration’ and the Jews: Studies in Political and Intellectual History,” PhD diss., Columbia University, Faculty of Political Sciences, 1956.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, iv.
- ⁵ Maurycy Mochnacki (1803-1834), a literary and music critic and independence activist, was a theorist of Polish romanticism. Andrzej Towiański (1799-1878) was

a philosopher and religious leader who preached the coming of the apocalypse. Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) is the national poet of Poland, the author of *Pan Tadeusz*.

⁶ Duker, "The Polish 'Great Emigration'", 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The Polish Museum Collection from Rapperswil was transported in 1927 to independent Poland. A significant part of it, archive materials in particular, was destroyed during the World War II. For more information, see the entry "Polish Community Organizations: Switzerland," available at <https://www.archiwa.gov.pl/pl/>.

⁹ On the Conference of Jewish Relations, see David Rosenstein, "The Conference on Jewish Relations: An Appraisal by a Participant," *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 3 (1955): 239-41. This issue is devoted to papers delivered at the Tercentenary Conference on American Jewish Sociology.

¹⁰ Abraham G. Duker, *The Situation of the Jews in Poland* (New York: American Jewish Congress, 1936).

¹¹ Abraham G. Duker and Meir Ben-Horin, *A Jewish Social Studies Reader: Emancipation and Counter-Emancipation. Selected Essays from Jewish Social Studies*, with an introduction by Salo W. Baron (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1974).

¹² For a list of Duker's publications, see Lloyd P. Gartner, "In Memoriam: Abraham G. Duker," *Jewish Social Studies* 49, nos. 3/4 (1987): 191-94. Part 1 of the list, "Polish Studies," is complete; Part 2, "A Selection of Other Works," contains approximately three-fifths of his output, according to the memorial essay, 191.

¹³ The International Conference on Polish-Jewish Relations was held at Somerville College, Oxford University, in September 1984.

¹⁴ Abraham G. Duker to Norman Lamm, September 12, 1985, TAU Archives, Duker Collection, file 247.

¹⁵ Isaac Lewin, "Preface," in Isaac Lewin, Abraham G. Duker and Naftali A. Lewin, eds., *A History of Polish Jewry during the Revival of Poland* (New York: Shengold Publisher, 1990), 1.

¹⁶ Isaac Lewin, "Political History of Polish Jewry, 1918-1939," in *A History of Polish Jewry during the Revival of Poland*, 7-220; Nahum Michael Gelber, "The National Autonomy of Eastern-Galician Jewry in the West-Ukrainian Republic, 1918-1919," in idem, 221-332.

¹⁷ Abraham G. Duker, *The Situation of the Jews in Poland* (New York: American Jewish Congress, 1936). Although listed as a book, this work is only thirty-one pages long.

¹⁸ Salo Baron, foreword, TAU Archives, Duker Collection, P-65-3.